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FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0848

C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 000702

FOR S/SRAP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/20/2019

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SUBJECT: INTERIOR MINISTRY BRIEFS SPECIAL ADVISOR HOLBROOKE
ON SAUDI COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

Classified By: CDA DAVID RUNDELL, 1.4(b),(d)

11. KEY POINTS:

-- (SBU) Special Advisor Ambassador Richard Holbrooke was briefed on Saudi counterterrorism efforts at a May 16 meeting with Interior Ministry officials at the Security Forces officers Club in Riyadh. At the same meeting Holbrooke received a second briefing on Saudi terrorist finance activities (septel).

-- (C) The officials said the common motivation uniting most Saudi extremists was the conflict in Afghanistan, where many of the extremists had served and fought, and the Saudis now see that encouraging this under the label of Jihad was a mistake.

-- (C) A key strategy in the MOI's response to terrorism is to treat detained extremists as misguided in their view of Islam rather than as criminals.

-- (C) The MOI officials indicated strongly that release of additional photographs of U.S. detainees would have a negative impact on Saudi counterterrorism efforts and would be a "gift" to the extremists since Guantanamo detainees are seen by them as victims and heroes.

12. (C) Ministry Senior Advisor Major General Dr. Sa'ad al-Jabri welcomed Amb. Holbrooke on behalf of the Ministry, noting that Holbrooke was well known to the Saudis who remember him as the "Man of Bosnia." Holbrooke responded that his visit to Saudi Arabia had the attention of the highest levels of the U.S. Administration, and he hoped his meetings would mark the start of increased U.S./Saudi cooperation.

13. (C) The counterterrorism briefing began with history and geography: Briefer Captain Bandar Al-Subaie said the Takfiri ideology behind extremist groups dated back to the earliest days of Islam, and had figured in the killings of two early Caliphs. Its tenets were reflected in the beliefs of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and had spread from there to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and then to the Arabian Peninsula where it had been taken up by modern day terrorists including Al-Qaeda (AQ). Recent years had been punctuated by a series of "objections to modernity," such as the attack on the Grand Mosque in 1979, and the Olaya and Khobar bombings, both of which had killed Americans. Saudi Arabia had 2200 kilometers of land borders with Yemen and Iraq which posed challenges. The Iraqi border was flat and porous, while the frontier with Yemen presented difficult terrain where it was easy for terrorists to hide.

MEN, MONEY, AND MINDSET

14. (C) Saudi Counterterrorism strategy focused on addressing the "men, money, and mindset" behind terrorism, Bandar continued. The terror movement in Saudi Arabia had gone through three phases: momentum, regrouping, and fragmentation. In the first phase, AQ had built its terrorist cells and operations using returned fighters from Afghanistan and new recruits. The government had responded tactically and strategically, including introduction of the terrorist rehabilitation program. This phase had ended with

the killing of "AQ on the Arabian Peninsula" leader al-Muqrin in 2004. In the regrouping phase, government pressure had pushed AQ back, forcing it to leave Riyadh and seek new targets and tactics, including attacks on the oil industry. This phase ended in 2005 with the killing of terrorist leader Saud al-Qutaini at al-Rass in Qassim. In the final phase of fragmentation, the authorities pursued the remnants of the terrorist cells, which were left without ideological leadership or safe places to hide. The Saudis had measured their success by a downward trend of incidents and casualties; the security forces had suffered 74 killed and over 600 wounded in action against terrorist since 2003.

15. (C) Bandar related that the MOI had conducted a study in 2004 of terrorism detainees as a basis for developing a "processing model" of extremist violence, to account for the political, economic, social, and media, factors that created alienation and led individuals to active or passive involvement in extremist groups. The research had revealed that 77 percent of extremists were Saudi, the majority was between the ages of 21-30, and was in general less educated. Income level was not necessarily a motivation.

RECRUITING AND RADICALIZATION

16. (C) Holbrooke asked how the extremists targeted and recruited new adherents, and whether there was a distinction between those recruited to extremism generally and those recruited to specific extremist groups. Dr. Sa'ad said the Saudis had discerned a process of recruitment and radicalization that began with scouting for prospects in mosques, schools, and internet chat rooms. Madrassahs were not a big factor because they were not common in Saudi Arabia. Tribal affiliations also played a part, he said; in particular some tribes in northern Saudi Arabia had been more involved because of their links to Iraq and Syria, but no single tribe stood out. Extremist groups employed various tactics, including "trap and scare," to increase their ranks. Recruits entered a culture like that of a gang or cult, from which it could be hard to escape. The MOI had reports of individuals who had been killed because they wanted to leave.

17. (C) Holbrooke asked what motivated the detainees the Saudis had studied. Dr. Sa'ad answered that Afghanistan was the "common factor." Many of those who engaged in extremist violence in Saudi Arabia had been to Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation "when we encouraged them," he said, adding that "It was a mistake to say Afghanistan was Jihad." Holbrooke acknowledged the U.S. had also encouraged opposition to the Soviets, and asked whether the detainees were driven by animosity towards Israel. Dr. Sa'ad replied that "all of these conflicts contribute." Capt. Bandar said the MOI had good information on the organization of terrorist cells in Saudi Arabia. As a result of previous military training, the cells are trained to carry out operations without knowing the bigger picture. One of the terrorist goals was to attract foreign forces to Saudi Arabia (e.g. the U.S. forces stationed in the country during the invasion of Iraq) and use the presence of these forces as a recruiting tool.

SAUDI RESPONSES

18. (C) The MOI had responded by conducting a war of ideas in mosques and the media, Bandar continued, to "expose" Takfirism and violence, focused on the concept that the extremists were not "terrorists," but "deviants" who were "misguided" in their view of Islam. ("The extremists don't like this label," interjected al-Humaydan. Holbrooke said "misguided" was a useful term which would be relevant to counterterrorism work in Afghanistan.) The Saudi "counter-radicalization" effort was distinct from the "de-radicalization" program created to help individual extremists "disengage" and rehabilitate. Disengagement by itself could also be a good result if the individuals abandoned active participation and violence. Bandar said the MOI's measure of success was whether its counterterrorism efforts were "killing more than we are making." Holbrooke

asked about MOI resources; Dr. Sa'ad assured that the Ministry had "many resources" to fight terrorism.

¶9. (C) Bandar indicated that of the 117 returned Guantanamo detainees placed in the MOI's rehabilitation program, 107 had 'graduated' and ten were still in the program. Only 12 had been rearrested, for violating travel restrictions, recontacting extremist associates, or because an assessment of their behavior indicated they were not fully rehabilitated. Another 11 former detainees were unaccounted for; most were presumed to be in Yemen. One relapsed former detainee had surrendered again. Holbrooke asked whether any rehabilitated detainees now helped rehabilitate others. Al-Humaydan said this was the case, mentioning one former detainee who had survived a suicide bombing mission in Iraq and now assisted the rehabilitation program.

¶10. (C) Holbrooke asked whether any women were among the detained terrorists. Al-Humaydan replied that several had been arrested. The women had worked mostly on recruiting. The most "famous" of these had turned out to be a 22 year old Egyptian woman married to an older Saudi man, who had used the Internet to start a web magazine for female extremists. She had served a prison sentence and been deported. The lesson, al-Humaydan said, was that "we need to use our women, too" in the fight against terrorism.

¶11. (C) Summing up, Captain Bandar stated that Saudi Arabia wanted greater international cooperation to fight terrorism. The Saudis faced counterterrorism challenges emanating from neighboring states, regional conflicts, and non-state actors. The influx of pilgrims for Hajj and Umrah, and protecting critical infrastructure were issues of specific concern. "International events" such as the release of detainee photographs also had an impact on Saudi efforts, he concluded.

A GIFT TO AQ

¶12. (C) Holbrooke noted the debate in the U.S. over the release of additional photographs of U.S. detainees, and asked whether release would have an impact in Saudi Arabia. Dr. Sa'ad replied that this would be a "gift" to the extremists. Guantanamo detainees are seen as victims within extremist groups, and are thus "candidates to be heroes," and to be given leadership roles in AQ, he said.

¶13. (U) Meeting participants

U.S.

Special Advisor Ambassador Richard Holbrooke
Barnett Rubin, Senior Advisor
Dan Glaser, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury
David Rundell, Charge d'Affaires
Andrew Roth, Embassy Riyadh
Edwin Brown, Embassy Riyadh (notetaker)
Jeff Smith, Embassy Riyadh

Saudi Arabia

Major General Sa'ad al-Jabri, Senior Advisor, Ministry of the Interior

Major General Khalid al-Humaydan ("Abu Ali"),
Counterterrorism Advisor,
Ministry of the Interior

Brigadier General Ahmed al-Issa, U.S. Liaison, Ministry of the Interior

Captain Bandar al-Subaie, Assistant to Sa'ad al-Jabri

¶14. (U) Amb. Holbrooke cleared this telegram.

RUNDELL